

Melvyn Douglas, Veteran of 76 Movies, Dies at 80

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Melvyn Douglas, the consummate actor whose finely etched features graced motion picture screens during the Golden Age of Hollywood, died Tuesday in New York. He was 80.

Douglas, who acted in 76 feature motion pictures, died at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Hospital, where he had been admitted July 29. The hospital attributed death to pneumonia complicated by a heart condition.

During a 50-year career, Douglas won both an Emmy and a Tony Award for theater and television, as well as two Oscars for best supporting actor—for "Hud" with Paul Newman in 1963, and "Being There" with Peter Sellers in 1979.

He had recently completed a role in the film thriller "Ghost Story," which was shot on location in upstate New York. He starred in that movie with Fred Astaire and Douglas Fairbanks Jr.

In terms of style and substance, Douglas' career was virtually divid-



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Melvyn Douglas in 1971.

ed in two, with a 10-year absence during the 1950s.

His early years were spent as a
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His portrayal of an aging cattleman in the 1963 movie "Hud" won Douglas the first of two Oscars.



Douglas won his second Oscar playing one of the country's richest men in 1979 film "Being There."

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suave, romantic leading man opposite Hollywood beauties such as Gloria Swanson, Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. In his later years, he played a variably feisty, senile or crafty old man in "Hud," "Being There," "The Candidate," and "I Never Sang for My Father."

Critiques Own Work

In a 1980 interview after the release of "Tell Me a Riddle," a movie about a retired couple's rediscovered love for each other, the tall, thin and still elegant Douglas termed his early roles "shallow" and his later ones "more of a fulfillment." Almost all the critical acclaim he received came during those latter years.

"It was a bit ironic," he said, because by that time he suffered from angina, diabetes and arthritis. "I didn't have the physical capacity to do a number of things I might have. But I've been able to do enough; I can't squawk."

And there were footnotes to the dramatic career.

In 1931 he wed Helen Gahagan, then an actress but later to become the politician who suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of Richard M. Nixon in 1950 during a U.S. Senate race in which Nixon said she was soft on communism."

Once asked his opinion on women's liberation, Douglas replied: "It's nothing new to me. I've been married to it for almost 50 years."

Mrs. Douglas died of cancer in June, 1980.

Because of the prominence of his wife in politics, it was often forgotten that Douglas himself was one of Hollywood's leading liberal activists in the latter 1930s and suffered from communist witch hunts a decade before the McCarthy era began.

Enlists in Army

Before he enlisted in the Army to fight in World War II, some thought Douglas might be headed for elective office himself. Years later, when asked why he had not, he said political candidacy was "never my cup of tea" and added:

"I went off to the Army. My wife was asked to run while I was away. (Mrs. Douglas first went to Congress in 1944.) She kind of took over."

Douglas' earliest years were characterized by a drive for independence within his own family that was later to typify both his acting and his politics. He was born April 5, 1901, in Macon, Ga., the son of a Russian-born pianist, Edouard Hesselberg, and a Kentucky-born mother.

Much of his childhood was spent traveling as his parents often moved, living in what he termed "genteel poverty" in various American cities, Canada and Europe as his father taught or performed.

"I dreamed of being a writer or a lawyer," he later said, but he rebelled at music, which he felt his father pushed at him. He also steered clear of the ministry, he said, partly because his mother "told me a number of times when I was growing up she had dedicated me to the Lord."

He tried twice to run away to join the Army, the second time succeeding (though he was too young) during World War I. "I wanted to get away from the constraints of home," he said.

After the war, Douglas rejoined his family, then living in Chicago. After short stints reading gas meters, selling hats at Marshall Field's and being a newspaper reporter, he joined a regional repertory group run by Shakespearean actor William Owen.

His first role was Orlando in "As You Like It," he later recalled, but because Owen was inordinately fond of Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest," Douglas played roles in that so often that "at one point, I could quote that play from beginning to end."

Stock Theater

During most of the 1920s he worked in various Midwestern stock companies and even ran his own for one season in Madison, Wis. While he was there, he briefly married and divorced. One son, Gregory, a teacher in Massachusetts, came from that union.

In 1928 he landed his first Broadway role, in Adela

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Rogers St. John's "A Free Soul." Two years later he was cast as the lead in a David Belasco production of "Tonight or Never," over the initial objections of its more established co-star, Helen Gahagan, who reportedly declared:

"Who is he? No one has ever heard of him. And I can tell by his face he can't act." They married less than a year later on his birthday, April 5, 1931. They had a son, Peter, a psychotherapist, and a daughter, Mary.

It was also in 1931 that Hollywood beckoned, in the guise of Sam Goldwyn. He wanted to turn "Tonight or Never," which was a romantic comedy, into a film starring Douglas and Gloria Swanson, rather than Helen. Attracted by the "opportunity for considerably more money," Douglas decided to go. "Helen was not happy about it. But she came along and worked in theater out here," he said.

His second film, "As You Desire Me," with Garbo, quickly established him as a top romantic leading man. Between 1931 and 1942, he appeared in 44 movies, often light farces, while under contract to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Columbia, among them "Ninotchka" and "Two Faced Woman" with Garbo and "Angel" with Marlene Dietrich.

Nevertheless, Douglas made later say of this initial period of glamor and success, "I got fed up before the end of 1932. I became a kind of standard-brand, sophisticated tongue-in-the-cheek drawing-room type. It was like the can of peas that sold the best.

Felt Restricted

"I had done a lot in the theater before and I'd thrived on variety. This was very limiting."

Once again he wanted to rebel against what he saw as the "constraints" on his life. There was the lack of choice in his roles: "On more than one occasion I did not like the script at all and the part even less." And there was a lack of freedom: "If you wanted to take a trip someplace," he recalled later, "the studio could step in and say you can't leave, we might need you."

It was in this frustrated atmosphere—"my whole being resented it"—that Douglas turned to politics. In the late 1930s he was a founder and key member of three organizations: the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, which fought Nazism; the Motion Picture Artists Committee,

which opposed fascism in general; and the Motion Picture Democratic Committee, which championed among other issues President Franklin D. Roosevelt's quest for a third term in 1940.

His activism was a stark contrast to the "drawing room playboy," as he described himself, seen on screen. And that was no accident, he said later.

Analyzes Actions

"It's just possible some of the things I was doing were a kind of rebellion against the parts I was playing."

But like other Hollywood activists of the late 1930s and early 1940s, such as screenwriter Philip Dunne, Humphrey Bogart or Frederic March, his positions came to the attention of conservatives, who charged that the organizations with which he was involved were "infested with Communists."

A Photoplay story on Douglas appeared, titled, "Is Melvyn Douglas a Communist?" And he was one of many in Hollywood questioned by the newly formed House Un-American Activities Committee under its first chairman, Martin Dies. He eventually was cleared of "communist tendencies."

Though his pre-World War II career did not seem to be affected by his politics, he recalled later he had felt pressure, "the iron fist with a velvet glove." On one occasion, he said, Louis B. Mayer called him in for a "fatherly confab, and wound up among other things saying perhaps I read too many books. And at one point suggested maybe my wife would like to work in pictures—if I was a good boy that could be brought about."

In his book "Take Two," screenwriter Dunne said, "In many ways our activity resembled the 'radical chic'

movement of the 1960s." But Douglas did not agree. "What I sense is that causes got to be 'in.' Our causes were not popular then. Now almost everybody who is a success seems to be looking for a cause."

By 1940 Douglas' prime cause was the Fight For Freedom, a committee that pushed for U.S. entry into World War II. "I felt just the opposite about that war as I later felt about Vietnam, which I disagreed with thoroughly," he said.

When Pearl Harbor was bombed, he enlisted—at age 40—as a private and went through basic training. He was assigned to the China-Burma-India sector, and emerged a major four years later.

After the 1940 Democratic Convention, which Douglas attended as a delegate and his wife as his alternate, Mrs. Douglas was asked to become Democratic national committeewoman for California. In 1943, when Democratic Rep. Tom Ford decided to retire, she ran for his seat and won the first of three terms.

"By the time I got back from the Army," her husband said later, "she was a national figure."

Leaves Movies

After the war, Douglas made eight movies, such as "Sea of Grass" with Katharine Hepburn and "Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House" with Cary Grant. Then he left films 10 years, and worked in theater and television.

He was on tour in a play called "Two Blind Mice" during Nixon's vitriolic Senate campaign against his wife, so his assistance to her was limited to "tape recordings, telegrams, that sort of thing. I was unhappy not to have been here but I just couldn't, being committed to this (tour) thing."

Not long after Mrs. Douglas' defeat, the couple moved to New York City. "I was working almost entirely in the

East," he said. "There did not seem to be any point keeping the house here."

Yet his Hollywood career would soon blossom again—this time in a series of craggier, deeper character studies—after an enormously successful stage tour as Clarence Darrow in "Inherit the Wind," a play about the Scopes "monkey trial."

Raps Producers

"That opened up a whole area of things," he recalled acidly in 1980. "I don't think there's always much imagination on the part of the picture-producing world. There's a great deal of imitation. Douglas has been known to play these comedy parts and then he gets too old so they don't offer him anything much. And then he comes along and makes a big hit in the theater and suddenly they start offering him old lawyers to play. That's exactly what happened."

In the 1980 interview, he said he did not know if he had a favorite film. Discounting the earlier ones, he said after reflection, "I thoroughly enjoyed 'Being There' " in which he played the presidential adviser who gains White House entree for a simple-minded gardener.

But he had no favorite co-star, he said. "My memories of pictures are centered around directors." Among his favorites were Hal Ashby of "Being There" and Ernst Lubitsch, for whom he made "Ninotchka" in 1939 with Garbo.

At one point he signed a contract to write his memoirs, but more recently said he was "not enthusiastic about it," concerned he had nothing "significant" to say.

What was more important to him, he said, was "getting through the years I have left with some dignity," and the knowledge, he told another, "what I've done hasn't always been admirable perhaps, but I've been a free soul."